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Religion of the Santals

In the foregoing pages we have noticed the various classes of Santal deities. The question now naturally arises if the religious practices of the Santals are not some form of an active worship of some deities and lesser spirits, together with a vague belief in souls and a future existence connoted by the term 'Animism.' One is puzzled to think, as Risley was, as to what is the exact idea of the Santal when he thinks about the spirits, say of the hills. Is it a reverence for the spirit of the flesh? Does he think he is in danger of being ruined by it? Risley says, "No." According to him, when a Santal thinks of a tiger-spirit, he does so from the "vague dread of a mysterious tiger-power or tiger-demon, the essence and archetype of all tigers, whose vengeance no man.....could hope to escape."[1]

But it must be noted, however, that the conception of abstract power in itself independent of a material vehicle, is difficult for the aboriginal mind. Thus, to the Santal, *Thàkur Jiu* or *Dhòròm* is not an abstract conception, but a real entity, with feelings and desires akin to those of man. For his Ancestor Spirits in particular, he exhibits filial devotion which may be likened to the Hindu

1 Risley, *People of India*, page 225.

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evidence showing the influence of Hindu ideas on Santal magical practices. In the race of life, the Santal finds inexplicable super-normal phenomena. He does not know how to react to the unknown and unknowable; so he has recourse to magic to deal with the impersonal forces and energies through appropriate rites and spells. This is done not by all the Santals, but only by the *Ojha*, a specialist in the art of magic and witch-craft. And he is generally the common doctor for all the Hinduised tribes and the Muṇḍà people. What the witch-doctor does is to practise the art of dissociating himself with the aim of spirit-communication, when he chants some magic formulae and makes the patent gestures while he performs the time-honoured rites to conjure the spirits. All these he does with the aid of some spirits, and although his mission is like the priest of religion to attain curative results that endure to the benefit of Santals individually or the tribe taken as a whole, it cannot be said that anti-social results do not follow due to the activities of some malignant *Ojhas* out to wreak personal vengeance on their enemies with the aid of malevolent spirits.

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765 769 the departed spirit who has now taken his place with the ancestors. His son remains under an obligation to name him at the time of the family sacrifices, and his widow owes to him and to herself certain marks of her widowhood. She wears no flowers or vermilion in her hair and she leaves off the iron bangle given her in marriage. Now, however, the family is free to resume normal relations with the world of men and of spirits, for once again they can marry and give in marriage.

761 Death is essentially an interruption of the normal processes of living. In the conditions under which the Santals live it is often sudden in its onslaught; it descends upon a house unexpectedly and usually as a cruel visitant, for the number of those who live to enjoy a peaceful old age is small. It is never due to accident, for this is a concept beyond the range of Santal philosophy, and the living take pains to discover the cause of every death that occurs, for their own protection. Unless steps are taken to prevent a recurrence it is common belief that at least three deaths will take place in quick succession. But it remains wrapped in [538] mystery. In one of the folk-tales it is told how a woman craved a boon from a holy man: "Give me this boon, to know where the *jivi* goes when we die and by what road does it depart, through the mouth or through the nose, and having departed where does it go? Give me to see what happens. Tell me also when I shall die and when I have died where will my *jivi* go?" Man is com- 795 pounded of two different substances, *hopon*, or body, and *jivi*, or 828 soul; these are sometimes separated in dreams, and the final [774] separation in death is a fact that none can deny, but what [539] happens then? Death figures in many sayings that express the sense of the unknown. "In this life", runs one saying, "there is eating and drinking and the wearing of clothes. In the next life who knows what there is?" Some will tell that on death the soul [538] of man enters into a large lizard, the *ghinni*.[1] One story that has a wide currency tells of two men who lay down to rest at the foot of a tree. One of them fell asleep and the other was amazed to see a large lizard coming out of the mouth of his sleeping companion. When the latter awoke he said that in his dream he had been led to a place where treasure lay buried. Yet another common saying expresses scepticism concerning this belief. "Whether after death I shall become a common lizard, *kakra*, or a large lizard, I know not." This saying is used to give expression to the ancient materialist principle of behaviour: "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

[1] Probably *Tiliqua rufescens*.